

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Greenwich		
Unit of Assessment: 27 - English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Trading Places: creating narratives to transform secondary-school pupils' understanding of the significant and diverse role of work in adult life, the nature of what it is, and what it can be		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2016 – December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Andrew King	Professor of English Literature	29/09/11 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: June 2020 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Stories we tell about 'work', its activities and conditions, inform our decision making and behaviour, which in turn affect our mental well-being. Research by Professor Andrew King at the University of Greenwich has helped secondary school-age children understand that such stories are historically determined and that there are alternatives. The impact was generated by the "Trading Places" creative writing competition as part of the wider research project led by King, <i>Business, Labour, Trade and Temperance periodicals in the Nineteenth Century</i> (BLT19) which makes freely available previously ignored Victorian periodicals concerned with commercial, manual and professional labour and activates them with contextual materials and activities. The competition enabled 49 pupils in England aged 12-15 and 16-18 to compare the stories they and their families told and heard about work today with stories from the past, and thereby, make clear to them what work is, what they want work to be and what they value about it.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>King's research is part of a new wave of Victorian studies that places periodicals at the centre of literary and historical research. Refusing the notion that "literature" is somehow immaterial, exclusive and excellent for all time, King is keen to study all kinds of texts, whether traditionally "literary" or low-status non-fiction, with the attention scholars have traditionally brought to canonical literature. Fundamental to his enterprise is the belief that knowledge is essentially narrative.</p> <p>Addressing a question central to Business Studies and the psychology of work but not previously studied in the discipline of English literature, 'How is non-professional work narrativised and what led to the Business, Labour, Trade and Temperance periodicals in the Nineteenth Century (BLT19) project (2016-) underpinned by O1 and O2.</p> <p>The BLT19 website (O3) constitutes additional original research not only in its identification, location and digitisation of copies of relevant magazines otherwise not available (sometimes not even in copyright libraries) but also in its penumbra of secondary materials contributed by King and his collaborators that ask and answer the following six questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do the media (digital and paper periodicals) affect knowledge and feelings? 2. What are the historical contexts of individual periodicals? 3. What are, and how to define, the periodicals concerned with work? 4. What are the historical and cultural relations between "literature" (conceived of as narrative) and the BLT19 corpus? 5. What are the ethical issues such a study brings to the fore? 6. To what extent are ideas and feelings about work that Victorian periodicals promoted still with us today and how does that comparison elucidate what "work" means for us? <p>Academics may be familiar with Victorian theories of labour, but the stories about and conceptions of labour communicated by the widely disseminated and hugely influential press that BLT19 makes available remain virtually unexplored. While the issue of how the past influences how we</p>		

think of work today is the topic of many books, perhaps most famously David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs*, their claims are almost always based on a generic understanding of the history of work; what BLT19 does is argue from specific historical evidence upwards. It shows not just the importance of narratives of work discipline in general, but how those general stories manifest in specific jobs, and adds missing details about the importance of emotional labour, friendship and, above all, the power of narrative at all levels to support resilience.

One of the reasons most histories of work are generic is that we have not known what the relevant specialist press of very few industries comprised. While there is substantial research on radical labour history and the radical press, there is a good body of work on the activist temperance press, and the rare history of an individual trade journal, there is nothing that looks at the wider field of mainstream, non-radical periodicals aimed either at tradespeople or at the generic "British Workman" or "British Workwoman." This neglected field is what BLT19 covers. Mapping the field meant the creation of a set of spreadsheets (available on BLT19, **O4**) that listed the relevant periodicals every five years 1845-1900. These constituted the basis of **O1**, the first-ever overview of the field based on hard data.

Research on the databases led to the realisation that few of the relevant periodicals were available (some not even in research libraries). This in turn led to the digitisation part of the project, and then to the secondary materials which either comment on the digitised periodicals, use them as the basis for their conclusions, or, crucially for this Impact Case Study, use them to provoke reflection on what we think and feel about "work" today (see especially **O5**, the result of collaboration with artists). Engaging with the materials has enabled testing of the generic claims about the influence on us of nineteenth-century beliefs about the importance of work discipline and work practices aimed to maximise the profits of employers. Above all, engagement enables us to study the history of feelings that halo specific occupations and to ask to what extent these and their derivatives are still powerful today, why that is so and what alternatives there might be.

3. References to the research

O1. Andrew King. 2020. "The Trade and Professional Press", *Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press*, volume 2, edited by David Finkelstein, Edinburgh University Press: 558-585. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.8447>. [Available from university on request]

- "This important chapter [**King's**] questions how press history is written, and how and what texts are selected to create it." The volume as a whole is described as a "hefty volume [that] should be present in each university library, as a precious, and indispensable tool for students and scholars who investigate not only the British and Irish nineteenth-century press, but Victorian culture and technology, visual studies, advertisement and, generally, the complex and evolving relationship between Victorian readers and printed information."

[Review by Francesca Orestano](#), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.8447>.

O2. Andrew King. 2016. 'Periodical Economics,' in *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, ed. **Andrew King**, Alexis Easley, and John Morton, Routledge: 60-73. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315613345> [Available on request]

- [Winner of Robert & Vineta Colby Scholarly Book Prize](#) 2017 awarded by the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals for the book that most forwards our thinking about nineteenth-century periodicals in the preceding year.

O3. Andrew King et al. 2016-20 Nineteenth-Century Business, Labour, Trade and Temperance Periodicals [Online]. Available at: <https://BLT19.co.uk>.

- Stefania Forlini, "Mining the Material Archive: Balancing Sensate Experience and Sense-Making in Digitized Print Collections" (<http://doi.org/10.16995/olh.282>) calls the site "particularly notable."

O4. Andrew King. 2019 - Trade and Professional Periodicals Database:

<https://www.bl19.co.uk/academic/trade-and-professional-periodicals-database/>

- This is the underlying data set for O1, but it is listed here separately since it is fundamental to the project.

O5. Andrew King. 2019. Ed. *Keep the Door of My Lips: the Unspoken Cost of Work*. Stephen Lawrence Gallery. 48 pages, 44 illustrations. ISBN: 978-0-9573430-5-4. Also available at

<https://www.bl19.co.uk/blt19-exhibitions-2/blt19-exhibitions-2/blt19-exhibitions/keep-the-door-of-my-lips-exhibition-catalogue/>.

- This booklet accompanied an exhibition curated by **King** and an independent art curator Connie Gallagher that ran in the Stephen Lawrence Gallery, Greenwich, 11 July -14 August 2019. “Displaying images from Victorian periodicals and trade magazines alongside research by Professor **Andrew King** and featured artworks from Catherine Hoffman, Emmanuelle Loïselle, Sarm Micciché and ‘Home is not My Home’ by Dr Joyce Jiang, Tassia Kobylinska & The Voice of Domestic Workers, this exhibition – by turns beautiful, heroic, shocking, comforting, unsettling – wants to get us to think about what work really means for us.” (<http://www.greenwichunigalleries.co.uk/keep-the-door-of-my-lips/>)

4. Details of the impact

The BLT19 project led by **King** included a short story competition called “Trading Places” which was its pathway to impact. The competition was directed towards two age groups, 12-15 and 16-18, and was judged by **King**, two collaborators **King** had engaged with for an exhibition using resources from BLT19 in 2019 (Emmanuelle Loïselle and Connie Gallagher) and by Dr Deborah Canavan, the research fellow on the BLT19 project in 2020. The competition was designed to generate narratives about what work was, is and should be, by exploiting materials from the BLT19 website (as of 31 December 2020, over 36,000 hits by over 10,000 separate visitors). Entrants were required to write a short story (1500 words in the case of 12 to 15-year olds; 2000 in the case of the older age bracket) in response to materials available on the site that they specified and justified in an accompanying note. The activity is a direct exploration of research questions 4, 5 and 6. It was originally planned for Spring 2020, but COVID-19 forced its delay until Autumn 2020, which in turn created challenges for contact with schools and teachers and thereby a lower number of entrants than if we had been able to proceed as planned.

The BLT19 competition promoted under-represented groups in the stories written by its entrants.

As detailed in **S1, sec. 3**, there were 50 entries (49 valid) from 23 schools across England; 1 in Scotland; 1 in Switzerland; 2 in the Republic of Ireland. 36 entries were from state-school pupils, 10 private, 3 outside the UK. 60% of the entrants were Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14), 22% Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) and 18% Key Stage 5 (ages 16-18), an expected breakdown given the demands of the UK curriculum and examination system. 10% marked themselves as disabled, slightly higher than the [national average of 8%](#). The most commonly cited inspirations were the lavishly illustrated *British Workwoman* and *British Workman* (13 and 11 entries respectively), followed by the *Meat Trades Journal* (7). These periodicals were aimed at working-class and petit-bourgeois readerships, and the fact that they generated over 60% of the entries shows the extent of our reach into groups that do not often see themselves or their families represented in materials studied at school. This is demonstrated when looking at explanations for the choice of the stories included:

- my great grandfather was a butcher (**S1, sec. 1, para. 5**)
- [writing the story helped me] understand the jobs our parents do and why they do that (**S1, sec. 2; para. 34**)
- I never see me or my family in what we do in school (**S1, sec. 1, para. 10**)
- my mother runs a corner shop and I never seen anything like it before (**S1, sec. 1 para. 15**).

Optional self-reporting of ethnicity data (14% mixed race, 12% African, 56% White British and 6% White other) showed the activity encouraged a much higher participation of ethnic minorities than national ethnicity demographics would have suggested. Additionally, 68% of entrants were female and increased awareness of the varying natures of women’s labour and the pressures on women at work were explicit in 12% of the entrants’ reflective commentaries, though it was much more apparent in the stories themselves. As one wrote: “[issue] 235 from [the *British Workwoman*] inspired me particularly. I liked the way that although times had changed when she was telling her story it was still relevant” (**S1, sec. 1, para. 43**). Two of the winning entries (2nd and 3rd prizes in the 15-18 category) were powerful examples of the effects of women’s varied work, one examining

the damaging psychological effects of a purely domestic role (“be selfless and forget even my own name” – see [“Cleanliness is Next to Godliness”](#)) and the other the double burden that women carry of earning money and caring for others (“While her brother began to resurface to the air, Agnes tried to be the branch his children could hold onto” – see [“The Man Who Drowned and Swam Again”](#))

The BLT19 competition enhanced participants’ understanding of resilience in the workplace and general work conditions.

- *I now understand that to be happy you must have a job you enjoy and find interesting (S1, sec. 2, para. 6)*
- *[T]he BLT 19 website gave me an understanding of the level of commitment needed for a job (S1, sec. 2, para. 17)*
- *[Men] marched on Weymouth for 6 hours and no men faltered. That is why I focused on the naval trainee in my story having hurdles to overcome (S1, sec. 2, para. 7)*

98% of the 50 entrants said that the experience had helped them understand better what it meant to have a job (S2, column M) and almost all the short stories entered were concerned with resilience in the workplace. Whether in the military, the baker’s shop, the building site, the factory or the home, the stories inspired by BLT19 (as described by their writers in S1, sec. 1) concerned at least survival when not success, either by hinging on rules for success at work gleaned from the Victorian magazines (e.g. “customer experience is important,” S1, sec. 1, para. 2), the need for “commitment” (remarked 4 times; S1, sec. 1, paras 12, 17, 24, 27) and persistence in the face of “hurdles to overcome,” or stories of the discovery of self-worth (“he sees his work as a valuable and important duty and part of who he is,” S1, sec. 1, para. 18). An unexpected impact was that 22% of participants added that writing the stories helped them understand their parents better (father 10%; mother 6%; parents in general 6%: S1, sec. 1).

More expected and more common (32%) was the realisation that working conditions today are generally better than the past, though sophisticated responses questioned any simple notion of improvement – for example the winner of the 12-15 category about migrant workers, and the entrant who wrote “despite magazines advertising that it’s possible, I wanted to show that not everyone can truly achieve that, not all families can have all children being successful” (S1, sec. 1, para. 45).

The BLT19 competition enabled participants to understand how emotional labour, external support, knowledge and empirical observation skills are key to jobs.

Acknowledgement of emotional labour as a form of work and the need for the support of family, friends and colleagues during problems at work were frequent: the correlation of “work”, verbs of knowing and conversation was very high in the short stories as a whole (above 0.84; S2, column Z has all the stories). This is much less visible in the commentaries in (S1, sec. 2) than it was in the stories, but still appeared in 5 of them, each time with explicit reference to the *British Workwoman* periodical on the website. A few times family breakdown was associated with lack of communication, which only emphasises the perception of the need for sharing stories outside work in order to support work, a social structure that was usually presented in positive terms. All the above are fundamental to the purpose of the work-based magazines on BLT19: they all have instructive purposes, argue from empirical evidence and promote the necessity for support networks outside work. Examples include:

- *Tom then started thinking about what a family actually was and decided that ... the five jobs between them had split them apart long ago (S2, cell Z/350)*
- *There’s a publication made specifically for construction workers, called Building World. My father gets all the editions delivered, and after reading them he will leave them by the big table. Each night I sneak downstairs and pour over every single word, soaking it all up. I know the prices of almost every building material off by heart and I know techniques on different construction methods from the Questions and Answers. (S2, cell Z/38)*

Entrants developed empathy through the BLT19 writing activity.

- *I have written the story with little dialogue so as to predominantly focus on the character's feelings (S1, sec. 1, para. 29)*
- *Writing a story made me feel like the character (S1, sec. 2, para. 4)*
- *i feel for those women but we wouldnt be here now without them (S1, sec. 2, para. 40; punctuation as in original)*

57% of the commentaries and almost all stories emphasised the importance of sympathetic identification with the disadvantaged (e.g. variations of “it put me in there [sic] shoes” occurred 5 times in the commentaries). It is characteristic of the sentimental tradition that most of the Victorian source stories were written in **(S1, sec. 4, paras 6, 7)**. It led in many cases to the realisation of how “privileged” the entrants felt they were. This is an imaginative, affective response fundamental for social cohesion. It also prepares pupils for workplaces today which increasingly consider empathy and compassion key to successful working. Encouraging sympathetic identification is the key aim of the “Trading Places” competition: seeing it so strongly represented demonstrates entrants’ increased understanding not only of what work has to be, but also a clearer vision of what they want it to be and what they value about it.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 The PDF available at the following address lists the anonymised but otherwise unedited responses to salient questions asked of entrants to the creative writing competition in 2020. Where relevant or necessary to protect identities, data on the webpage is aggregated.

<https://www.blt19.co.uk/impact-case-study-data-ref-2021/>

The PDF is organised in 4 sections with numbered paragraphs. These are referred to in Details of the Impact above as sec (= section) and para (= paragraph).

- 1) explanations / reflective commentaries of the stories by the entrants themselves
- 2) responses to what they learned from the activity of entering the competition
- 3) aggregated demographic data
- 4) analysis of word frequencies treating the stories as an aggregate. This includes a visualisation and list of the most common words and a discursive analysis of that data. These aggregates are all that is visible in public of the submitted short stories: publication of every story was not part of the competition agreement. Only the 6 winning entries were published on the BLT19 website. These latter, with the permissions of the entrants and / or of their guardians, went through an editing conversation between the entrants and **King**, and can be found [here](#).

S2 A spreadsheet which includes the unedited submitted stories as well as all the other data (including the demographics) is available on request from the university. It is not included here for confidentiality reasons. The names and addresses of schools have been retained but the names and email addresses of entrants and their carers have been deleted in accordance with the competition agreement. References are made in Section 4 to specific cells of this spreadsheet in the form column letter / number of row.